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Scrap yard awaits word on cleanup funds

Word on whether an abandoned east Augusta scrap yard will make a priority list to receive federal hazardous waste cleanup funds is overdue, a state environmental official says.

Without that listing, it remains unknown whether the former F. O'Connor yard off Route 17 will get federal help to remove wastes including polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) left behind in outdoor lagoons when the yard closed several years ago.

PCBs are suspected cancer-causing chemicals once used to insulate electrical transformers. Oil containing PCBs had been drained from transformers at the O'Connor site for years before the manufacture of PCBs was banned in the 1970s.

But Hank Aho of the state Department of Environmental Protection doesn't think the site will qualify soon to tap the federal "Superfund" program, based on preliminary tests at the site.

"If I had to make a guess right now, I'd say the O'Connor site would not make the list this year," he said this week. The site will compete with hundreds of others across the country for funds.

But he also said, "We've been surprised before on these things."

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency was to issue a listing of the nation's 400 most severely contaminated hazardous waste sites by the end of November, said Aho.

Regional EPA officials could not be reached for comment.

Preliminary tests were taken by consultants to the EPA in May at the site, with more detailed tests taken in October. But Aho said the EPA decision will be based only on the May data because of deadlines the federal agency set for receiving information.

The PCB-contaminated water is in two lagoons about 200 yards uphill from Riggs brook. The tests are intended to measure concentrations of the remaining chemicals in and around the lagoons.

PCB-contaminated oil is also stored in tanks at the Central Maine Power Co. service building on Old Winthrop Road. CMP has a federal license to store the waste oil, but a proposed expansion of the storage capacity has drawn neighborhood opposition.

Scrapyard I think is O'Connor
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